Nightlife

photographs by Michael Mitchell

Nightlife

photographs by Michael Mitchell

Organized and circulated by the Art Gallery of Ontario Extension Services

Exhibition produced by Glenda Milrod

This publication was made possible through the support

of The McLean Foundation

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026 with funding from
Art Gallery of Ontario

https://archive.org/details/nightlifephotos00mitc

Foreword For the past three years, Michael Mitchell has been capturing images that have allowed him a shared experience, an encounter between the photographer and the subject matter. *Nightlife's* large format serial presentation allows us, the viewers, to share his discovery and simplification of important aspects of his life, to see photographs not individually but as parts of a complete image. Our complicity underlines the image-maker's methods and directives.

The subjects, entrenched in darkness, dispose of the unessential and allow us an uninterrupted view of the relevant. The photographer is making pictures about being alone, ways of being alone, and the search for companionship. This theme occupies the two central sections of *Nightlife.* The first section, *Ground*, is conceived of as a simple setting of the stage. The final section, *Home*, forms a qualified answer. "I want photographs that deal with important matters and not only with the pleasures of form. The significant matters are those that deal with living. I want photography that talks about life in an emotionally approachable way. Failure to do so seems to short-change its potential. Making good pictures is asking, in the company of others, how to live."[1]

Nightlife opens in the Education Gallery of the Art Gallery of Ontario in January, 1978, and tours extensively throughout the Province of Ontario. It is with great pleasure that we present this visual exploration.

Glenda Milrod

1. Letter from Michael Mitchell to Allan Porter, Editor, *Camera,* Lucerne, Switzerland, October 13, 1977

Preface Last night when I went out with my camera I found everything changed. The insects were silent, the trees were empty and the grass was stiff under my feet with the first frost. Now winter will drop down between us like a pane of glass. Our summer night assignations when we met and conspired to make photographs are over. You all gave yourselves; in return I only give a few photographs. My one comfort is knowing that while we made pictures together none of us were alone.

Michael Mitchell
October, 1977

Acknowledgements These photographs are for everyone who helped make them. They're for Pinky who takes off his hat with his feet, for John who lives alone with his iguanas on a Florida Key, for Sandy whose python died with the picture, for Frank and Ayesha at a dance on the *Trillium*, for Mark and my sister with a joke on the Bocas, for Arthur Boyd who twice went out with his cane through mosquitoes and skunks to a sumach, for Joe who lent me his pool and Doris who lent me her tree, for Danielle who swam, for Smokey and Dave, for Kerry who's still riding, for a friend in Winona and new friends in Miami, and for Ed fighting the dark with a sparkler. Special thanks and regards to all those who aren't here. Sometimes I was too tired and slow or just didn't see.

My gratitude to Michael Stewart for his support, to Scott for his care and Allan Porter for his enthusiasm. Thanks to Bev, Akira and Claude. Above all I thank Glenda who has struggled through so many problems and projects with me for what seems like so long that I hardly know what to say. My love to you all.

Michael Mitchell

Introduction/Allan Porter, Editor, *Camera,* Lucerne, Switzerland

PAINTING IS A SCIENCE; IT IS BASED ON THE RATIONALIZATION OF SIGHT. A NOBLE ONE AT THAT, FOR IT ENABLES THE ARTIST TO COMPETE WITH NATURE. LEONARDO DA VINCI

In the artistic adventure, Leonardo understood the imperative need for the artist to create ideas that exist alone in the mind and not in nature itself. Creative photography allows the artist fulfilment of this need.

Creative photography has been with us for some time, but before the 1960s, it was other areas of photography which were usually labelled "creative." Many photographers in the fields of reportage, documentary, fashion and advertising so excelled that their images were acclaimed as works of art. Critics and curators alike acknowledged this dichotomy in the photographer's world and carefully separated the commercial from the artistic, thus encouraging the creative aspect more than ever before. Now a new generation of photographers has emerged, a fervent generation which has chosen to make a living from creative photography.

But many of these photographers are like the inventor who is reluctant to show his invention until he has perfected it. He works in secret, devoid of contact with contemporaries and the outside world, only to discover that there are others thinking in the same way and that some are months or even years ahead of him. In this competitive world, the fear of sharing an idea prematurely prevents the photographer from exposing himself in the early stages of discovery. The need for exposure is also complicated by a lack of sources in which to publish the newer work. If publishing possibilities were greater, the photographer would be more willing to share his new ideas. Exhibitions and catalogues, other important channels for young photographers, are also limited.

For the creative photographer, the preparation of a new idea is a long

process. Previous works and experiences spark certain developments in the artist's mind. These developments are transformed into an idea. The process by which the idea is finally visualized may also take much time. The selection of the medium and the manner of presentation are very complex technical problems. The choice of camera, film type, colour or black-and-white, print size and other vital elements must be carefully thought out in order to adhere faithfully to the original idea. Then, after everything has been taken into consideration, the exhibited or published photograph must convey its intention to a beholder who is, in most cases, a layman.

Michael Mitchell is one of the new breed of seers who will become increasingly visible in the years to come. With his knowledge of technique, including the emulsion of film in colour and electronics, he transcends the limits of previous photographic accomplishments. The ideas presented in his imagery are things we could never see without his masterful visualizations. *Nightlife,* the title which links this exhibition of his photographs, brings to mind *Nightwood,* a novel by Djuna Barnes, an American writer who is more talked about than read. In a chapter called "Watchman, what of the Night," Barnes explores the divisions of day and night:

'HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OF THE NIGHT?' THE DOCTOR INQUIRED WITH A LITTLE IRONY;...'YES,' SAID NORA, AND SAT DOWN ON THE ONLY CHAIR. 'I'VE THOUGHT OF IT, BUT THINKING ABOUT SOMETHING YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT DOES NOT HELP.'

'HAVE YOU,' SAID THE DOCTOR, 'EVER THOUGHT OF THE PECULIAR POLARITY OF TIMES AND TIMES; AND OF SLEEP? SLEEP THE SLAIN WHITE BULL? WELL, I...WILL TELL YOU HOW THE DAY AND THE NIGHT ARE RELATED BY THEIR DIVISION. THE VERY CONSTITUTION OF TWILIGHT IS A FABULOUS RECONSTRUCTION OF FEAR, FEAR BOTTOM-OUT AND WRONG

SIDE UP. EVERY DAY IS THOUGHT UPON AND CALCULATED, BUT THE NIGHT IS NOT PRE-MEDIATED...THE NIGHT, "BEWARE OF THAT DARK DOOR!"...

'TAKE HISTORY AT NIGHT, HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OF THAT, NOW? WAS IT AT NIGHT THAT SODOM BECAME GOMORRAH? IT WAS AT NIGHT, I SWEAR!... ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT ROME WENT BURNING. PUT THAT IN THE NOONTIDE AND IT LOSES SOME OF ITS AGE-OLD SIGNIFICANCE, DOES IT NOT? WHY? BECAUSE IT HAS EXISTED TO THE EYE OF THE MIND ALL THESE YEARS AGAINST A BLACK SKY. BURN ROME IN A DREAM, AND YOU REACH AND CLAW DOWN THE TRUE CALAMITY. FOR DREAMS HAVE ONLY THE PIGMENTATION OF FACT. A MAN WHO HAS TO DEAL IN NO COLOUR CANNOT FIND HIS MATCH, OR IF HE DOES, IT IS FOR A DIFFERENT RAGE.'1

We all live in the two separate worlds of day and night. Mitchell's *Nightlife* affects those of us who have defined the uncanny division of day and night and those who have not. It is not that Mitchell creates imagery which is unique or uncanny but that he translates his imagery into an idiom which supersedes reality and confronts the viewer with visions he himself can see in imagination but is incapable of expressing. These exposures are acts of contemplation: photographer to photograph and photograph to public. In his own description of their meaning, Michael Mitchell has remarked:

MY INTENTION WAS NOT SO MUCH TO CREATE 24 INDIVIDUAL PHOTOGRAPHS AS IT WAS TO EXAMINE 24 ASPECTS OF A SINGLE THEME. MY AMBITION IS NOT FOR THE INDIVIDUAL PHOTOGRAPH ON THE WALL, BUT LIES IN THE CONTENT OF THE VIEWER'S MIND AFTER SEEING ALL THE IMAGES....

THE SECOND SOURCE WAS QUITE SIMPLY MY OWN DISCOVERY OF THE FLASHGUN AFTER MAKING SO MANY AVAILABLE-LIGHT PICTURES. HERE WAS A WAY OF VIGNETTING AN IMAGE, OF CONCENTRATING ON WHAT I PERCEIVED OF AS ESSENTIAL WHILE DISPOSING OF

THE IRRELEVANT BY SIMPLY UNDER-EXPOSING IT SO THAT IT DROPPED OUT ALTOGETHER. PHOTOGRAPHERS OFTEN SAY THAT IN USING FLASH ONE IS ESSENTIALLY BLIND. WHEN WORKING AT NIGHT EXPERIENTIALLY QUITE THE OPPOSITE IS TRUE; ONE SUDDENLY SEES.

Nadar's photographs, taken in 1860 in the catacombs and sewers of Paris, can be classed among the first to make use of artificial light. He used materials worthy of a speleological expedition and made exposures for 15 minutes in the glow of Bunsen burners. His pictures pleased a few engineers and scientists but never reached the public. Nadar never repeated these experiments. But as it developed, the revolutionary use of artificial light enabled the viewer to see something in reproduction which he may never have had the opportunity to see in its original state, and even if he had, it would not have been so clearly defined as in the photographic image. With artificial light it became possible to transmit the unseen and the unknown through photography. Split-second imagery was now possible and moments could be captured which previously had not been known to exist. The place, the thing and the person were unmasked. This does not mean, however, that the metamorphosis from available light to artificial light represents truth in itself, even though the vision is inherently true and unretouched. We are not concerned here with truth in the philosophical sense, but rather with abrupt, split-second imagery and/or the interrupted moment of life. The camera can lie with a straight face and serious attitude just as efficiently as it can reveal a spontaneous truth that overwhelms the viewer. By using a fast exposure and an instantaneous light source, the photographer takes a great risk. The image is not pre-arranged and the film emulsion picks up things that were there but hitherto unwitnessed by man.

Michael Mitchell's photographic images reveal a common denominator in

their design. They are symmetrical in appearance and placement, centre-staged but with an important variance in scale. The depth and size of each image creates a visual pattern which compels us to assemble the entire idea into one thought. He has purposely constructed the images in fragments which eventually become a gestalt idea in the viewer's mind. His snake in box and dancing couple show in abrupt sections what would have been an entire image. In contrast, the diving board fountain, the tea garden, the flash-lit tree and the seamless studio paper in a garden all portray the whole image. Direct line portraiture, such as the man with iguanas on his shoulders, offers another mode of presentation.

Regardless of the derivations and deviations, the entire work creates definite symmetrical impressions. The square format relinquishes the vertical and horizontal, and each image creates a design evocative of the circle, square or triangle. The simplicity of the interior design of the film frame allows us to see easily and readily. Mitchell's vignetting technique and choice of subject matter emphasize the colour configurations and full colour saturation against night's darkness and colourless surroundings. Basically, Mitchell's photography records that which is in front of us and interprets a moment of time in space as precisely as possible. The subject matter is less important in the final analysis, though subconsciously the artist tends to adopt subject matter with which he is familiar in order to fully realize the new visions he creates.

Michael Mitchell is one of those photographers of the new generation who can interpret the world with a profundity which is, and always will be, a principal requirement of creative photography. A.P.

1. Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood,* Faber and Faber Limited

This exhibition is for Annick who waited alone so many evenings.

Ground

Solitude

the Cal

Companionship

WINONA LADIES AUXILLARY FOR BROWNIES & GUIDES
TEA GARDEN

Home

Design: Scott Thornley, Art Gallery of Ontario
Type: Typsettra Limited, Toronto
Printer: Herzig-Somerville Limited, Toronto
Colour separations: Herzig-Somerville Limited, Toronto
Colour printing of 48″ x 48″ exhibition prints: Contempo Colour Lab., Toronto
© Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978
ISBN 0-919876-43-X

Nightlife

photographs by Michael Mitchell

Introduction by Allan Porter,
Editor, *Camera,* Lucerne, Switzerland

"Michael Mitchell is one of those photographers of the new generation who can interpret the world with a profundity which is, and always will be, a principal requirement of creative photography." A.P.

Art Gallery of Ontario